



Might is Right

BY

SIR WALTER RALEIGH

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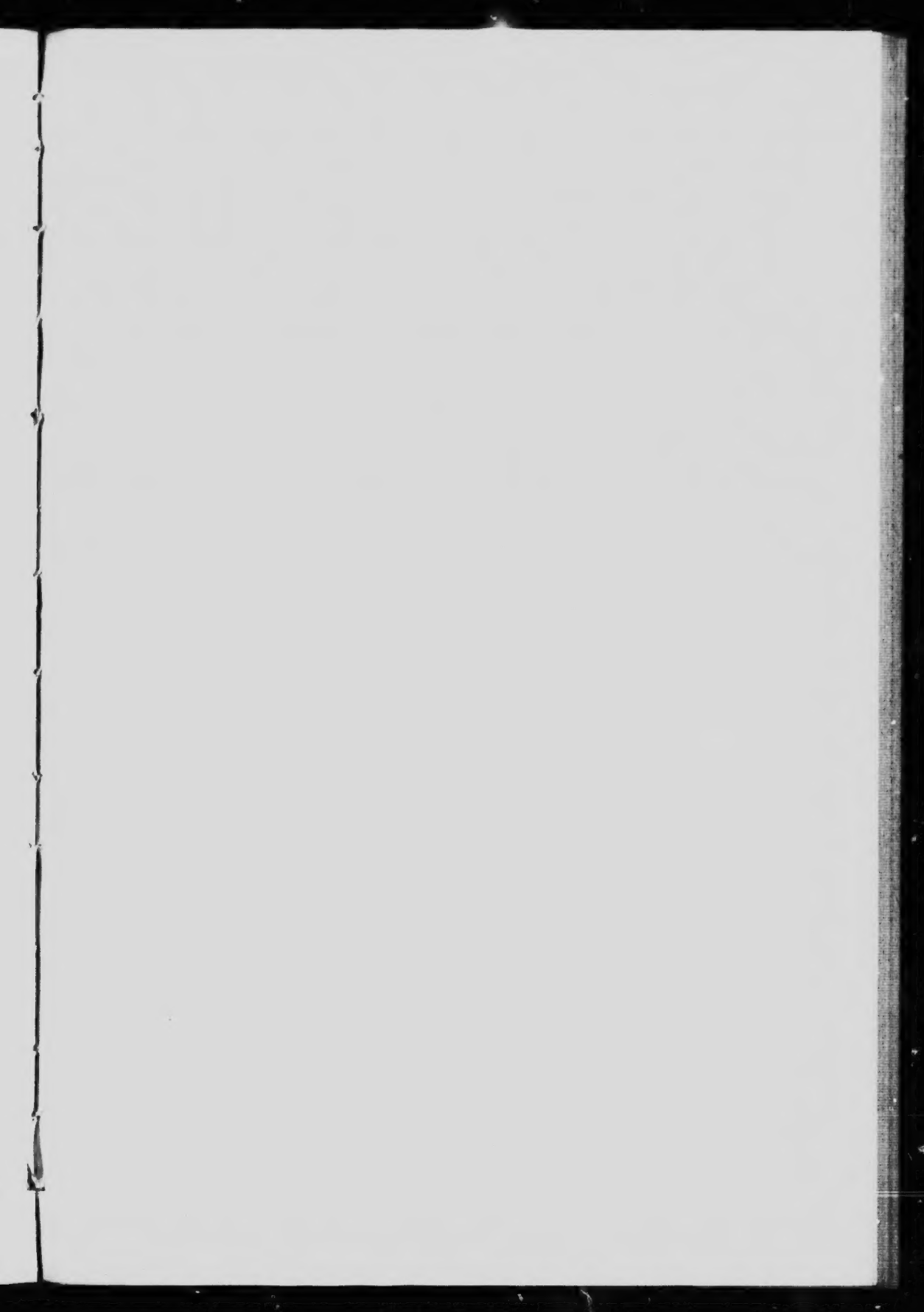
LONDON EDINBURGH GLASGOW NEW YORK

TORONTO MELBOURNE CAPE TOWN BOMBAY

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

HUMPHREY MILFORD

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890976

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It is now recognized in England that our enemy in this war is not a tyrant military caste, but the united people of modern Germany. We have to combat an armed doctrine which is virtually the creed of all Germany. Saxony and Bavaria, it is true, would never have invented the doctrine; but they have accepted it from Prussia, and they believe it. The Prussian doctrine has paid the German people handsomely; it has given them their place in the world. When it ceases to pay them, and not till then, they will reconsider it. They will not think, till they are compelled to think. When they find themselves face to face with a greater and more enduring strength than their own, they will renounce their idol. But they are a brave people, a faithful people, and a stupid people, so that they will need rough proofs. They cannot be driven from their position by a little paper shot. In their present mood, if they hear an appeal to pity, sensibility, and sympathy, they take it for a cry of weakness. I am reminded of what I once heard said by a genial and humane Irish officer concerning a proposal to treat with the leaders of a Zulu rebellion. 'Kill them all,' he said, 'it's the only thing they understand.' He meant that the Zulu chiefs would mistake moderation for a sign of fear. By the irony of human history this sentence has become almost true of the great German people, who built up the structure of modern metaphysics. They can be argued with only by those who have the will and the power to punish them.

The doctrine that Might is Right, though it is true, is an unprofitable doctrine, for it is true only in so broad and simple a sense that no one would dream of denying it. If a single nation can conquer, depress, and destroy all the other nations of the earth and acquire for itself a sole dominion, there may be matter for question whether God approves that dominion; what is certain is that He permits it. No earthly governor who is conscious of his power will waste time in listening to arguments concerning what his power ought to be. His right to wield the sword can be challenged only by the sword. An all-powerful governor who feared no assault would never trouble himself to assert that Might is Right. He would smile and sit still. The doctrine, when it is propounded by weak humanity, is never a statement of abstract truth; it is a declaration of intention, a threat, a boast, an advertisement. It has no value except when there is some one to be frightened. But it is a very dangerous doctrine when it becomes the creed of a stupid people, for it flatters their self-sufficiency, and distracts their attention from the difficult, subtle, frail, and wavering conditions of human power. The tragic question for Germany to-day is what she can do, not whether it is right for her to do it. The buffaloes, it must be allowed, had a perfect right to dominate the prairie of America, till the hunters came. They moved in herds, they practised shock-tactics, they were violent, and very cunning. There are but few of them now. A nation of men who mistake violence for strength, and cunning for wisdom, may conceivably suffer the fate of the buffaloes, and perish without knowing why.

To the English mind the German political doctrine

is so incredibly stupid that for many long years, while men in high authority in the German Empire, ministers, generals, and professors, expounded that doctrine at great length and with perfect clearness, hardly any one could be found in England to take it seriously, or to regard it as anything but the vapourings of a crazy sect. England knows better now ; the scream of the guns has awakened her. The German doctrine is to be put to the proof. Who dares to say what the result will be ? To predict certain failure to the German arms is only a kind of boasting. Yet there are guarded beliefs which a modest man is free to hold till they are seen to be groundless. The Germans have taken Antwerp ; they may possibly destroy the British fleet, overrun England and France, repel Russia, establish themselves as the dictators of Europe—in short, fulfil their dreams. What then ? At an immense cost of human suffering they will have achieved, as it seems to us, a colossal and agonizing failure. Their engines of destruction will never serve them to create anything so fair as the civilization of France. Their uneasy jealousy and self-assertion is a miserable substitute for the old laws of chivalry and regard for the weak, which they have renounced and forgotten. The will and high permission of all-ruling Heaven may leave them at large for a time, to seek evil to others. When they have finished with it, the world will have to be remade.

We cannot be sure that the Ruler of the world will forbid this. We cannot even be sure that the destroyers, in the peace that their destruction will procure for them, may not themselves learn to rebuild. The Goths, who destroyed the fabric of the Roman Empire, gave their name, in time, to the greatest mediaeval art.

Nature, it is well known, loves the strong, and gives to them, and to them alone, the chance of becoming civilized. Are the German people strong enough to earn that chance? That is what we are to see. They have some admirable elements of strength, above any other European people. No other European army can be marched, in close order, regiment after regiment, up the slope of a glaxis, under the fire of machine guns, without flinching, to certain death. This corporate courage and corporate discipline is so great and impressive a thing that it may well contain a promise for the future. Moreover, they are, within the circle of their own kin, affectionate and dutiful beyond the average of human society. If they succeed in their worldly ambitions, it will be a triumph of plain brute morality over all the subtler movements of the mind and heart.

On the other hand, it is true to say that history shows no precedent for the attainment of world-wide power by a people so politically stupid as the German people are to-day. There is no mistake about this; the instances of German stupidity are so numerous that they make something like a complete history of German international relations. Here is one. Any time during the last twenty years it has been matter of common knowledge in England that one event, and one only, would make it impossible for England to remain a spectator in a European war—that event being the violation of the neutrality of Holland or Belgium. There was never any secret about this, it was quite well known to many people who took no special interest in foreign politics. Germany has maintained in this country, for many years, an army of spies and secret agents; yet not one of them informed her of this important truth. Perhaps

the radical difference between the German and the English political systems blinded the astute agents. In England nothing really important is a secret, and the amount of privileged political information to be gleaned in barters' shops, even when they are patronized by Civil servants, is distressingly small. Two hours of sympathetic conversation with an ordinary Englishman would have told the German Chancellor more about English politics than ever he heard in his life. For some reason or other he was unable to make use of this source of intelligence, so that he remained in complete ignorance of what every one in England knew and said.

Here is another instance. The programme of German ambition has been voluminously published for the benefit of the world. France was first to be crushed ; then Russia ; then, by means of the indemnities procured from these conquests, after some years of recuperation and effort, the naval power of England was to be challenged and destroyed. This programme was set forth by high authorities, and was generally accepted ; there was no criticism, and no demur. The crime against the civilization of the world foreshadowed in the horrible words ' France is to be crushed ' is before a high tribunal ; it would be idle to condemn it here. What happened is this. The French and Russian part of the programme was put into action last July. England, who had been told that her turn was not yet, that Germany would be ready for her in a matter of five or ten years, very naturally refused to wait her turn. She crowded up on to the scaffold, which even now is in peril of breaking down under the weight of its victims, and of burying the executioner in its ruins. But because England would not wait her turn, she is overwhelmed

with accusations of treachery and inhumanity by a sincerely indignant Germany. Could stupidity, the stupidity of the wise men of Gotham, be more fantastic or more monstrous ?

German stupidity was even more monstrous. A part of the accusation against England is that she has raised her hand against the nation nearest to her in blood. The alleged close kinship of England and Germany is based on bad history and doubtful theory. The English are a very mixed race, with enormous infusions of Celtic and Roman blood. The Roman sculpture gallery at Naples is full of English faces. If the German agents would turn their attention to hatters' shops, and give the barbers a rest, they would find that no English hat fits any German head. But suppose we were cousins, or brothers even, what kind of argument is that on the lips of those who but a short time before were explaining, with a good deal of zest and with absolute frankness, how they intended to compass our ruin ? There is something almost amiable in fatuity like this. A touch of the fool softens the brute.

The Germans have a magnificent war-machine which rolls on its way, crushing all that it touches. We shall break it if we can. If we fail, the German nation is at the beginning, not the end, of its troubles. With the making of peace, even an armed peace, the war-machine has served its turn ; some other instrument of government must then be invented. There is no trace of a design for this new instrument in any of the German shops. The governors of Alsace-Lorraine offer no suggestions. The bald fact is that there is no spot in the world where the Germans govern another race and are not hated. They know this, and are disquieted ; they

meet with coldness on all hands, and their remedy for the coldness is self-assertion and brag. The Russian statesman was right who remarked that modern Germany has been too early admitted into the comity of European nations. Her behaviour, in her new international relations, is like the behaviour of an uneasy, jealous upstart in an old-fashioned quiet drawing-room. She has no genius for equality; her manners are a compound of threatening and flattery. When she wishes to assert herself, she bullies; when she wishes to endear herself, she crawls; and the one device is no more successful than the other.

Might is Right; but the sort of might which enables one nation to govern another in time of peace is very unlike the armoured thrust of the war-engine. It is a power compounded of sympathy and justice. The English (it is admitted by many foreign critics) have studied justice and desired justice. They have inquired into and protected rights that were unfamiliar, and even grotesque, to their own ideas, because they believed them to be rights. In the matter of sympathy their reputation does not stand so high; they are chill in manner, and dislike all effusive demonstrations of feeling. Yet those who come to know them know that they are not unimaginative; they have a genius for equality; and they do try to put themselves in the other fellow's place, to see how the position looks from that side. What has happened in India may perhaps be taken to prove, among many other things, that the inhabitants of India begin to know that England has done her best, and does feel a disinterested solicitude for the peoples under her charge. She has long been a mother of nations, and is not frightened by the problems of adolescence.

The Germans have as yet shown no sign of skill in governing other peoples. Might is Right; and it is quite conceivable that they may acquire colonies by violence. If they want to keep them they will have to shut their own professors' books, and study the intimate history of the British Empire. We are old hands at the business; we have lost more colonies than ever they owned, and we begin to think that we have learnt the secret of success. At any rate, our experience has done much for us, and has helped us to avoid failure. Yet the German colonial party stare at us with bovine malevolence. In all the library of German theorizing you will look in vain for any explanation of the fact that the Boers are, in the main, loyal to the British Empire. If German political thinkers could understand that political situation, which seems to English minds so simple, there might yet be hope for them. But they regard it all as a piece of black magic, and refuse to reason about it. How should a herd of cattle be driven without goads? Witchcraft, witchcraft!

Their world-wide experience it is, perhaps, which has made the English quick to appreciate the virtues of other peoples. I have never known an Englishman who travelled in Russia without falling in love with the Russian people. I have never heard a German speak of the Russian people without contempt and dislike. Indeed the Germans are so unable to see any charm in that profound and humane people that they believe that the English liking for them must be an insincere pretence, put forward for wicked or selfish reasons. What would they say if they saw a sight that is common in Indian towns, a British soldier and a Gurkha arm in arm, rolling down the street in cheerful brotherhood?

And how is it that it has never occurred to any of them that this sort of brotherhood has its value in Empire-building? The new German political doctrine has bidden farewell to Christianity, but there are some political advantages in Christianity which should not be overlooked. It teaches human beings to think of one another and to care for one another. It is an antidote to the worst and most poisonous kind of political stupidity.

Another thing that the Germans will have to learn for the welfare of their much-talked Empire is the value of the lone man. The architects and builders of the British Empire were all lone men. Might is Right; but when a young Englishman is set down at an outpost of Empire to govern a warlike tribe, he has to do a good deal of hard thinking on the problem of political power and its foundations. He has to trust to himself, to form his own conclusions, and to choose his own line of action. He has to try to find out what is in the mind of others. A young German, inured to skilled slavery, does not shine in such a position. Man for man, in all that asks for initiative and self-dependence, Englishmen are the better men, and some Germans know it. There is an old jest that if you settle an Englishman and a German together in a new country, at the end of a year you will find the Englishman governor, and the German his head clerk. A German must know the rules before he can get to work.

More than three hundred years ago a book was written in England which is in some ways a very exact counterpart to General von Bernhardi's notorious treatise. It is called *Tamburlaine*, and, unlike its successor, is full of poetry and beauty. Our own colonization began with a great deal of violent work, and much wrong done to

others. We suffered for our misdeeds, and we learned our lesson, in part at least. Why, it may be asked, should not the Germans begin in the same manner, and by degrees adapt themselves to the new task? Perhaps they may, but if they do, they cannot claim the Elizabethans for their model. Of all men on earth the German is least like the undisciplined, exuberant Elizabethan adventurer. He is reluctant to go anywhere without a copy of the rules, a guarantee of support, and a regular pension. His outlook is as prosaic as General von Bernhardi's or General von der Goltz's own, and that is saying a great deal. In all the German political treatises there is an immeasurable dreariness. They lay down rules for life, and if they be asked what makes such a life worth living they are without any hint of an answer. Their world is a workhouse, tyrannically ordered, and full of pusillanimous jealousies.

It is not impious to be hopeful. A Germanized world would be a nightmare. We have never attempted or desired to govern them, and we must not think that God will so far forget them as to permit them to attempt to govern us. Now they hate us, but they do not know for how many years the cheerful brutality of their political talk has shocked and disgusted us. I remember meeting, in one of the French Mediterranean dependencies, with a Prussian nobleman, a well-bred and pleasant man, who was fond of expounding the Prussian creed. He was said to be a political agent of sorts, but he certainly learned nothing in conversation. He talked all the time, and propounded the most monstrous paradoxes with an air of mathematical precision. Now it was the character of Sir Edward Grey, a cunning Machiavel, whose only aim was to set Europe by the

ears and make neighbours fall out. A friend who was with me, an American, laughed aloud at this, and protested, without producing the smallest effect. The stream of talk went on. The error of the Germans, we were told, was always that they are too humane ; their dislike of cruelty amounts to a weakness in them. They let France escape with a paltry fine, next time France must be beaten to the dust. Always with a pleasant outward courtesy, he passed on to England. England was decadent and powerless, her rule must pass to the Germans. 'But we shall treat England rather less severely than France,' said this bland apostle of Prussian culture, 'for we wish to make it possible for ourselves to remain in friendly relations with other English-speaking peoples.' And so on—the whole of the Bernhardi doctrine, explained in quiet fashion by a man whose very debility of mind made his talk the more impressive, for he was simply parroting what he had often heard. No one criticized his proposals, nor did we dislike him. It all seemed too mad ; a rather clumsy jest. His world of ideas did not touch our world at any point, so that real talk between us was impossible. He came to see us several times, and always gave the same kind of mesmerized recital of Germany's policy. The grossness of the whole thing was in curious contrast with the polite and quiet voice with which he uttered his insolences. When I remember his talk I find it easy to believe that the German Emperor and the German Chancellor have also talked in such a manner that they have never had the smallest opportunity of learning what Englishmen think and mean.

While the German doctrine was the plaything merely of hysterical and supersensitive persons, like Carlyle

and Nietzsche, it mattered little to the world of politics. An excitable man, of vivid imagination and invalid constitution, like Carlyle, feels a natural predilection for the cult of the healthy brute. Carlyle's English style is itself a kind of epilepsy. Nietzsche was so nervously sensitive that everyday life was an anguish to him, and broke his strength. Both were poets, as Marlowe was a poet, and both sang the song of Power. The brutes of the swamp and the field, who gathered round them and listened, found nothing new or unfamiliar in the message of the poets. 'This', they said, 'is what we have always known, but we did not know that it is poetry. Now that great poets teach it, we need no longer be ashamed of it.' So they went away resolved to be twice the brutes that they were before, and they named themselves Culture-brutes.

It is difficult to see how the world, or any considerable part of it, can belong to Germany, till she changes her mind. If she can do that, she might make a good ruler, for she has solid virtues and good instincts. It is her intellect that has gone wrong. Bishop Butler was one day found pondering the problem whether a whole nation can go mad. If he had lived to-day, what would he have said about it? Would he have admitted that that strangest of grim fancies is realized?

It would be vain for Germany to take the world; she could not keep it; nor, though she can make a vast number of people miserable for a long time, could she ever hope to make all the inhabitants of the world miserable for all time. She has a giant's power, and does not think it infamous to use it like a giant. She can make a winter hideous, but she cannot prohibit the return of spring, or annul the cleansing power of

water. Sanity is not only better than insanity ; it is much stronger, and Might is Right.

Meantime, it is a delight and a consolation to Englishmen that England is herself again. She has a cause that it is good to fight for, whether it succeed or fail. The hope that uplifts her is the hope of a better world, which our children shall see. She has wonderful friends. From what self-governing nations in the world can Germany hear such messages as came to England from the Dominions oversea ? 'When England is at war, Canada is at war.' 'To the last man and the last shilling, Australia will support the cause of the Empire.' These are simple words, and sufficient ; having said them, Canada and Australia said no more. In the company of such friends, and for the creed that she holds, England might be proud to die ; but surely her time is not yet.

Our faith is ours, and comes not on a tide ;
And whether Earth's great offspring by decree
Must rot if they abjure rapacity,
Not argument, but effort shall decide.
They number many heads in that hard flock,
Trim swordsmen they push forth, yet try thy steel ;
Thou, fighting for poor human kind, shalt feel
The strength of Roland in thy wrist to hew
A chasm sheer into the barrier rock,
And bring the army of the faithful through.